Rethinking Learner and Teacher Roles: Incorporating Student Voice and Agency into Teaching Practice

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Abstract

An increasing interest in the restructuring of teacher and student roles, with the aim of strengthening engagement, has influenced a focus on student agency in education research. Student voice involves learners and teachers sharing a narrative and working in partnership with one another to increase learning outcomes and inclusivity (Cook-Sather, 2014). Because this concept is relatively new, student voice is often perceived and implemented in a variety of differing ways. This literature review examines the current use and perspective of student voice in education and draws on a range of studies to investigate how the roles within student voice are understood, and the impact these have on effective teaching practice. In addition, the constraints brought forth by the multiple perspectives found within student voice are identified. Further recommendations for research include a focus on how these roles can be supported to best enable student agency, with the aim of producing positive learning experiences.

Keywords: Learner, Teacher Role, Student Voice, Agency, Teaching Practice, Engagement, Learning.

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Introduction

The development of a new curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2007) and a growing interest in 21st century learning has influenced what Cook-Sather (2006, 2014) describes as a "cultural shift" that repositions students as partners in educational practice. This concept redefines the power relations found within education and now there is an understanding that students' perspectives in learning should be valued and utilised to inform the improvement of teaching and learning practices, rather than viewing students as passive recipients. A fundamental characteristic of this shift is student voice and agency (Ferguson, Henreddy & Draxton, 2011). This recognises that learners have the ability to shape and make decisions regarding their education in ways that adults cannot anticipate (Mitra, 2003). The research indicates that liberal democratic countries, including the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand, have become world leaders in student voice initiatives (Sargeant, 2014). As a result, this literature review draws on research from these countries because each has recently focussed on adapting education policy and culture to better support the restructuring of teacher and learner roles. Student voice is typically enacted in research and practice through the invitation of learners to share their opinions, experiences, and knowledge of schooling to improve learning outcomes and create inclusive relationships (Cook-Sather, 2014). Through the collection and inclusion of students' perspective and ideas, teachers, researchers, and policy makers can gain a better understanding of how students make sense of learning and develop capacities to influence improvement. Although, as Cook-Sather (2014) highlights, recent research offers contested and varied understandings of the definition and enactment of student voice in practice and policy. This critical review therefore, focuses on how current literature understands the roles within student voice.

The Role of Teachers

An increasing number of teachers and researchers are acknowledging the benefits of consulting learners in educational decisions. Robinson and Taylor (2007) found that the acknowledgement of students as partners in learning has adapted teaching practice to better support students' learning and achievement. This shift in teaching practice and pedagogy has changed the teacher role from leader of learning, to facilitator of learning, where they are able to identify initiatives that enable the student voice.

Mitra and Gross's (2009) research found that when learners were provided with the capacities to engage their voice and make decisions about their learning, motivation, and engagement grew.

While their first case concentrates on discussing conditions that either created or diminished feelings of belonging, the second case emphasises initiatives where learners could collaborate with adults to address problems. The students discussed that teachers needed to focus on trust and collaboration to ensure learning was relevant and interpretable, and this promoted the creation of youth-adult partnerships at the school. Students responded positively to this adaptation, and although they noticed that a conservative teacher took longer to become comfortable with the idea, students recognised that the teacher was now "more open with us…She lets us voice our opinion more and it's not just her word and that's it" (Mitra and Gross, 2009, p.532). This highlighted that when teachers aim to enable egalitarian partnerships, learners felt comfortable participating and enjoyed the sense of agency the evolution of student-teacher roles brought.

Similarly, an earlier study by Mitra (2003), found that increasing student voice through the sharing of teacher roles benefited learning and improved the teacher's ability to meet student needs. In this research, the focus was again on partnership, with Mitra (2003) undertaking a quantitative study of a high school in the USA. One hundred students participated in semi-structured interviews and observations and the data were used to build a framework towards further empowering student voice. The students detailed a desire to actively use their voice and have greater control over their learning. This feedback was used to develop a two-pronged strategy, one that was split between teacher focused activities and student focused activities. Here, students and teachers had the chance to lead learning at different times. The findings suggest that changing the structure of teaching to encourage and support agency better can be achieved through the communication and analysis of student feedback and providing the opportunity to learn from one another. This data further implies that a shared approach to leadership is beneficial for creating democratic classrooms, which better supports both parties (Mitra, 2003). This reinforces the idea of teachers as partners and facilitators of learning. Although this case is careful in selecting a diverse range of student participants, increasing the sample size for greater empirical evidence could strengthen the connections between role sharing and improved learning outcomes.

An approach that shifts away from this sharing role, is the change in teacher training and professional development. This is a response to the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and links to the corresponding changes in education practice. Instead of focusing on researchers work to determine how student voice can be utilised, the literature also implies that teachers should be working towards activating student voice. The focus of Davison, Sinnema, Taylor and Mitchell's (2016) research was to determine how student voice could be included through contemporary teaching practices in New Zealand. The study found teaching as inquiry, exit passes, inclusive class discussion and surveys as practices that successfully increased student voice. The data were collected in two secondary schools and teachers who participated were part of professional learning groups within their schools. The focus of the learning groups was uncover how student voice inquiries could be used to improve learning outcomes. The inquiry concluded that to improve comprehension and work quality, teachers needed to modify their classroom practice towards increasing student-teacher partnerships. The findings revealed that *ākonga* (learners) valued the opportunity to listen to and teach one another, and have the teachers research practices that best suited their learning needs. Implications were noticeably positive, as several inquiries associated changes in student interpretation and understanding to the increased partnerships. This in turn influenced the teacher's appreciation and investment in student voice practices (Davison et al., 2016). Interestingly, the areas of improvement identified by teachers responded to the unease others had felt around the loss of power and authority, which has been a limiting factor in previous research.

Similarly, a small scale qualitative study in the UK sought to discover how student voice could support the construction of preservice teacher identity after recognising student agency as a key practice in the formation of teacher identity (Kidd, 2012). This ascertains that teaching philosophies should be centred around listening to learners. The research established that to promote speaking *with* rather than *for* learners, reflective and reflexive practices are required. The findings indicate that teaching philosophies should be framed around learning to listen to promote authentic partnerships, and in addition to previous literature, that being reflective allows teachers to conceptualise better and respond to what students say. The role of the teacher here is not only creating a shared narrative, but taking time to reflect on the effectiveness of student voice efforts with the aim of modelling best practice and using research to guide this process. Although Kidd (2012) acknowledges the anxieties teachers have in locating voice in educational contexts that differ from their own, in applying the reflective lens these concerns became manageable. The size and singular context of the study may limit the validity of these findings.

The Role of Students

The emphasis on collaboration in student voice research signifies that *ākonga* have a role as equal partners. Although teachers may still be required to introduce and scaffold these relationships, students also have a responsibility to participate.

In existing literature restructuring roles has solely been placed on teachers (Kidd, 2012; Mitra, 2003), as it is often perceived that students are unfamiliar or uncomfortable working alongside adults. In contrast to this, Rector-Aranda and Raider-Roth (2015) consider the role of students as active and honest contributors working beside adults. The USA study, described as having an action research stance, used qualitative methodologies to uncover how students exercise their agency and voice in an online simulation based environment. The research had a focus on intentional involvement, considering how students demonstrated and responded to their roles as honest participants. The study was particularly interesting because it used the computer based activity to allow anonymity when gathering and sharing student voice. This was found to be especially effective for middle school students discovering their role, with students commenting on their ability to "express their own ideas and opinions" (Rector-Aranda and Raider-Roth, 2015, p. 260) without fearing teacher resentment. This suggests that the student role is not only to be in partnership with teachers, but in addition, to be authentic, which in this case was best modelled through anonymous feedback. The negotiation of authentic tasks and contexts of the simulation found that students felt they had the capacity to think, act, and

speak as constructive partners, redefining the student roles as they participated in promoting change. The researchers, however, do suggest that the success may be limited by the ability for children to role-play and anonymously deliver feedback. This implies that learners were not actively changing their roles, and as a result, further research into similar initiatives is required to overcome this restriction.

This idea is supported by Ferguson et al., (2011). Their mixed-methods study interviewed 38 students within the USA and focused on how students perceived their environment and how this information could be used to improve teacher practice. A correlation was found between students being motivated to share responsible and authentic feedback and feedforward, especially those who were thought to be having a difficult time with learning becoming more successful. The teachers in this study commented that the data from learners were useful because it was inclusive and honest. Ferguson et al., (2011) concluded that students being motivated to provide feedback increased the efficiency and use of student voice. Although the sample size and acknowledgment of the positive benefits of student voice for so-called difficult students are valid, the context and purpose of the interview was not explained by researchers. This meant students continued to be recipients of teacher directed change. As a consequence, additional research is needed into how providing learners with context can improve student voice outcomes.

The Role of the School

In this critique, it is possible to see that schools as institutions, are powerful players in enabling or constraining student agency because they can hold teachers and students to account. For student voice to be enacted in education, the school has a duty to respond to the evolution of 21st century learning and be flexible in constructing themselves in ways that can support student voice initiatives (Cook-Sather, 2014).

Three qualitative studies from New Zealand and Finland identify that the role of the schools is to create and craft optimal learning environments to enable student voice practices (Bourke and Loveridge, 2016; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Sahlberg, 2007). Schools are asked to produce these environments to create a climate where learners feel comfortable voicing their perspectives, and consequently, teachers can use this information to positively adapt practice. The school environment that supported student voice in Robinson and Taylor's (2007) study had heightened use of interactive teaching, discussion, and investigation alongside more opportunities for *ākonga* to play a role in and use digital technologies. These structures bring forth the idea that schools need to provide physical spaces to activate student voice. The data imply that a school structure that works to assist student agency practices offers support for teachers to research and adapt. It was found that these influence increasingly positive learning outcomes for students. This study is influential because it is contextually bound to New Zealand and discusses the wider issues of power, equity, and culture that are often suppressed.

Furthermore, a finding from Sahlberg's (2007) study suggests that government and education sectors should place emphasis on increasing schools' flexibility and creativity. The research states that in doing so, schools are provided with the capacity to create policies that encourage creative decision making, and thus, easily incorporate student agency. Because both of these studies include a singular country, the conclusions remain relevant only to their specific context. It may be difficult to connect these findings because the educational system and policy in these countries are different. As a result, further research into a variety of frameworks is required to strengthen these conclusions.

This theory is reinforced by Bourke and Loveridge (2016) whose explorative mixed-method research, including seven schools and 49 students in New Zealand, uncovered that a school's role is also to embrace change to better suit and interpret student voice. The results emphasised that innovative or modern learning environments provided *ākonga* with greater choice and diversity. The teachers did comment on tensions associated with curriculum and community constraints, but when supported by the school itself, could influence student agency. This correlated to a significant improvement in intended student outcomes and achievement (Bourke and Loveridge, 2016). Although this study is recent and recognises the growing interest and use of innovative learning environments, again the sample size and singular context requires expansion. These studies highlight that the role of schools is to respond to innovative practices, and implement structures that enable teachers and students to benefit from role restructure.

Limitations of Student Voice

The literature reviewed highlights a key limitation within the definition and interpretation of student voice work. Cook-Sather (2006, 2014) has produced two lengthy analyses of leading research to consider how student voice can be best collected and adapted into teaching practice. The inquiry found that the majority of existing research only examines verbal voice, thus limiting inclusivity and not revealing the authentic perspective of all learners .

The 2006 Cook-Sather study considers the premises of existing student voice work, and concluded that research attempts to find a monolithic student voice, instead of legitimising each student's perspective. To overcome this problem in that study Cook-Sather clarify the shared and diverse range of commitments associated with student voice, and constructed a framework that requires consideration into the quality of voice collection. This suggests understanding voice in terms of bodily presence and text, as opposed to exclusively verbal explanations. The practices identified to achieve this range from interviewing, focus groups, and anonymous surveys to oral, written, and visual responses. This diversification of student voice incorporates multiple methods of collection and uses of student agency, and answers to the complexities of individual subjectivities that had not yet been considered in research. Cook-Sather (2006) conclude that subsequent research needs to focus on diverse participation as the basis of authentic student voice implementation, and to consider multiple methods of collection. This idea is supported by Simmons, Graham, and Thomas (2015), who asked students to imagine, draw, and discuss their ideas. Their study found a correlation with multiple methods and authentic perspectives, revealing that it is most effective to collect student voice through a variety of approaches.

Cook-Sather's more recent study (2014) investigated the trajectory of student voice in current educational research. In

response to the previous analysis, Cook-Sather (2014) explain that researchers have begun to incorporate student voice, not to support their own claims, but to create space for students to make claims of their own. This is achieved through the implementation of various and less traditional methods of collection, suggested in earlier work (Cook-Sather, 2006). Although, student voice has become increasingly inclusive, Cook-Sather (2014) highlight that further limitations surrounding the understanding of terminology have arisen. The review found that a singular definition of student voice does not exist, and thus, teachers and researchers continue to have differing perspectives which negatively impacts the effectiveness of student agency. This is attributed to the confusing terminology between *pupil voice* in the UK and Australia and *student voice* in the USA. To invalidate this shortcoming, Cook-Sather (2014) determine that the basis of student voice should be understood through student agency. This encompasses having the capacity and power to make choices, as opposed to simply having a say. It is implied that this will better align research and draw valid cross-contextual findings. Because much research applies student voice and student agency interchangeably, this critical review also employed this approach.

Conclusion

The evolution of 21st century learning and the creation of shared narratives has influenced adaptations in teacher-student roles. The results of this critical literature review emphasise that incorporating the opinions of learners into education is a complex process, but has been found to increase the quality of educational experiences for teachers and students alike. The research establishes the role of teachers as facilitators, students as authentic and honest participants, and schools as adaptive institutions to promote student agency and allow student voice to be heard effectively. Additional research is needed to establish how students can further extend their agency and reduce teacher directed change (Ferguson et al., 2011). This would equalise the student-teacher partnerships and create an all-encompassing framework for student voice. Further limitations of the literature discussed include the small sample sizes and singular contexts, that could have limited the efficiency of the findings. A future direction could be to look at how teachers, students and schools could be better supported in their unique and interconnected roles (Mitra and Gross, 2009).

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